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Corbyn Must Shake Off His Ideological Shackles And Tackle Brexit As It Actually Is, Not How He Wishes It Might Be

Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts

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Since 2016, the cross-spectrum political consensus has been that the primary driver of the vote to leave the EU was immigration. As such, both main parties committed to ending free movement in their 2017 election manifestos. Yet the end to free movement mandated in Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement has passed largely unremarked. The widespread opposition to the deal among Leavers shows that there is something more at stake in the Brexit imaginary. It is now the vexed question of regulatory convergence which preoccupies Brexiteers, for whom the EU represents an alien political and legal tradition suffocating the sovereignty of the British state. Any form of continued alignment with its rules and regulations, whether inside or outside the union itself, only extends this national subjugation.

Some on the left are still sufficiently able to suspend their disbelief to see a socialist 'Lexit' crawling from the wreckage. But the only Brexit actually existing - in truth, the only Brexit that could exist - was forged in the fire of nationalist reaction stoked by the Tories and Ukip in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Despite these origins, Jeremy Corbyn seldom criticises the idea of Brexit, bemoaning instead only the Tory handling of it. He continues to present a chimerical 'jobs-first Brexit' as both possible and desirable. Here the UK is envisaged as leaving the Single Market and ending free movement of labour while somehow retaining an equal say in the EU's trade deals and suffering no economic impact. Political expediency plays a part, out of misplaced fear the so-called 'Labour heartlands' will desert the party. But research shows a majority of Labour voters – rather than those who simply live in Labour constituencies – opposing any Brexit whatsoever. When it comes to other issues, Corbyn sets his political stock by challenging prevailing wisdom. Yet on Brexit, Corbyn leaves untouched the nationalism intrinsic to the entire project.

In our book *Corbynism: A Critical Approach*, we suggest this reticence derives from the particular way that Corbynism understands capitalist society. In the Corbynist worldview, capitalism is not a system which runs through our every move, but is rather an alien force which always sits outside us, parasitically draining wealth from the productive community. It is a small step to seeing that community of 'the many' as fixed in a certain national space, and a smaller step still to see the sovereignty of the nation state itself as its first line of defence against capital. Any limitation on the ability of the state to intervene in support of national industry infringes upon the possibility of a socialist national sovereignty. Whilst there are certainly better and worse ways of governing the state to strengthen the hand of workers, the idea the nation state is a standalone institution separable from and opposed to capital, rather than a dependent part of it, leads elements of the left into an ill-fated alliance with the reactionary tendencies driving Brexit.

Corbyn's opposition to continued membership of the Single Market rests on the belief that its State Aid rules – mutually-agreed limits on the amount of assistance states can provide to national industry – are merely a means by which capital prevents the nation-state from buttressing its productive community by bringing key industries into public

ownership. It seems Labour's orientation to the key policy issue of our time is governed by a desire for the state to play the role of capitalist in sectors like rail and water. Similarly, Labour's rejection of free movement stems from the belief that those who travel to work and live in the UK are a convenient device employed by capital to drive down the wages of British workers. In both cases, Labour's current position essentially coincides with the Brexiteer mantra that EU membership holds back the British economy.

Slight differences of emphasis arise around the EU's insistence upon a 'level playing field' mechanism to ensure regulatory convergence between the UK and the EU post-Brexit. While the right resent the 'level playing field' because it prevents them slashing taxes and worker protections, the Corbynite analysis sees it as a neoliberal trick to block a state-led socialist economy. Here, Labour's current position on Brexit effectively grants left-wing cover to right-wing claims over the restoration of a long-lost national sovereignty, failing to articulate the benefits of the EU as a flawed but unique experiment in post-national democratic governance securing peace in Europe for the past 50 years.

Any trade deal, within or without the Single Market, would be built upon mutually agreed rules. The production and exchange of commodities on a global scale demands convergence in standards and regulations. Shared obligations also manage relationships between states, sometimes in the interests of those who live under them. Take the much-maligned rules on State Aid, which prevent one party gaining an unfair advantage over the others by investing in, bribing or propping up industries to the detriment of workers and businesses in the countries that lose out. It permits active industrial policy, but within limits. Short of freeing states to engage in an economic war of all against all, if Labour want to raise the level of permissible State Aid, while retaining the benefits of frictionless trade, the way to do this is through negotiation within the EU. Unilateral action outside of the Single Market to boost industries locked inextricably in competition in a global economy might well force the EU to raise tariffs on British imports to ensure European firms suffer no disadvantage. The UK would benefit neither economically or politically from kickstarting what amounts to a protectionist trade war with its closest neighbours, waged on the backs of workers the continent over.

Unless Labour shifts on either Single Market membership or free movement, then May's assertion that it is either her deal, no deal or no Brexit is correct. But any deal short of Remain ends up realising what had been the Brexiteer's myth of lost sovereignty. 'Taking back control' through the nation-state is impossible in a globalised world. But it is this impossibility that makes the demand for control inexhaustible and politically dangerous. There is a real risk that Labour's reinforcement of Brexit's nationalist mythology makes less and not more likely a Remain victory in any hypothetical 'People's Vote'. With the likes of Another Europe lighting the way to an alternative, there is still time for Corbyn's inner circle to shake off their ideological shackles and face up to Brexit as it actually exists, rather than how they might wish it to be.